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TV Appearances By Ayatollah Refute Death

The aging Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini has been reported on his deathbed at least a dozen times since he took power in Iran more than five years ago.

Now he has emerged once again looking hale and hearty after a flurry of reports that he is ailing.

Intense speculation continues in western intelligence circles on the state of Khomeini's health—and on which of several potential successors appears to be in the best position to seize power when the ayatollah finally dies.

Since Iran is a closed society, the experts' assessments remain only speculation. But this much I can tell you:

During the summer, reports flowed regularly into the State Department suggesting that Khomeini was at the point of death.

There were even reports that he had died and that the fact was being kept secret while succession was being decided.

Khomeini spiked these rumors by making a few public appearances in the last couple of weeks. Indeed, Foggy Bottom sources told my as-

sociate Lucette Lagnado that Khomeini's televised appearances were deliberately designed "to dispel rumors that he is dead."

An appearance a few weeks ago rewarded the professional Khomeini-watchers with one nugget of speculative gold: Although Khomeini stood on his balcony and smiled as usual, his speech was read for him. The ayatollah, who has never shirked his oratorical responsibilities, spoke not a word to the faithful.

This lent some weight to reports in mid-July that Khomeini had suffered a mild stroke.

Lacking hard evidence, however, intelligence experts lean toward the possibility that Khomeini's summer ailment—if there was one—more likely was a heart attack.

Then, just last week, Khomeini added professional Iran-watchers by making personal appearances and meeting with a group of western reporters.

Secret intelligence reports assert that Khomeini suffers from another condition not uncommon for an 84-year-old man: severe prostate problems.

But the ayatollah's personal physician has reportedly joked that Khomeini "could handle another wife," which suggests that the problem isn't as serious as reported.

One thing intelligence sources do know is that Khomeini's heart spe-

cialist has made several house calls to his famous patient in recent weeks. The visits are relatively easy to log, because the doctor must cancel all his regular appointments when he is summoned to Khomeini's side.

Despite all the suggestions of his divinity, Khomeini is under no illusions that he is immortal.

Several months ago, he wrote a secret will, to be opened only after his death. It was widely believed that the will named his choice of a successor. But my sources report that assembly speaker Hojatolislam Rafsanjani sneaked a look at the document and was dismayed to find no designated successor.

Rafsanjani's choice is Ayatollah Montazeri, but he has so far been unable to persuade Khomeini to give Montazeri his official blessing.

The State Department's morning line makes Montazeri the favorite.

Considered a dark horse is President Khamenei, who has little but his own ambition going for him.

Another candidate is Khomeini's son, Ahmad, who is believed to be his father's favorite.

It is also considered possible that Khomeini will be succeeded, at least initially, by a committee of rivals jockeying for position.

Whatever the outcome, intelligence experts foresee unrest and disorder in post-Khomeini Iran but, at this point, no revolution.